



Impact of Adolescent Girls' Empowerment in South Sudan



Intervention

Decades of civil war have left South Sudan severely impoverished, underdeveloped and at the tail of the human development indicators. Today, it is one of the countries with a high percentage of youth under 25 with only about half of them being employed. Lack of decent job prospects makes young women particularly vulnerable to early marriages and childbearing which often pushes them on a path of low-skill income generation.

To empower young women socially and economically, BRAC followed an integrated approach to facilitate their labour force participation and increase sexual and reproductive health (SRH) awareness. The *Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents* (ELA) programme draws on the lessons learned in Bangladesh where 40,000 clubs have been reaching over one million girls since 1993. Supported by the World Bank, BRAC South Sudan implemented the ELA programme between 2011 and 2013 and served 3,000 girls 15 to 24 in Juba, Rumbek, Torit, Yei and Bor county through 200 ELA clubs.

Designed for the pre-conflict context, the programme operated within safe clubs set up in the community and open five afternoons a week. These clubs were run by older girls, selected from communities and trained to act as mentors to younger girls in exchange for a small lump-sum incentive. They were in charge of organising life-skills and SRH education. In the later years, the livelihood training on income-generating activities (IGAs) and financial literacy were delivered by entrepreneurs and professionals for out-of-school senior girls. Then, they were eligible to receive a small starting amount to capitalise on their acquired skills.



Research

Adolescent Girls' Empowerment in Conflict-Affected Settings: Experimental Evidence from South Sudan (Buehren et al., 2017, working paper, [World Bank](#))



Method

A clustered *randomised control trial* (RCT) method enrolled 120 villages into control and treatment arms. A total of 1,558 girls were followed from 2010 to 2015. The 2013 conflict which just before the endline survey was taken into account to examine the heterogeneity of the programme's impact by conflict exposure and to investigate if any beneficial effects survived the conflict.



▲ **10.4**
pp non-farm self-employment

▲ **10.3**
pp had savings

▲ **136,650**
SSP bridal price

▲ **14**
pp owned a house

▼ **1.1**
pp out-of-wedlock pregnancy

▲ **12.4**
pp had a place to meet with friends

▲ **11**
pp probability that no one had to go hungry

Conflicts usually push young women into employment out of necessity to provide for the family. ELA intervention set an example of how a suitable combination of training and services can stimulate local economies and develop an important bridge to guide young women to non-farm opportunities, even in times of unstable socio-economic disruption. The girls in non-affected treatment areas had a higher engagement in IGAs by 9.6 percentage points (pp) which was predominantly driven by **10.4 pp** higher non-farm self-employment. Girls in the control group were, however, 6.4 pp more likely to be in farm self-employment.

ELA girls were more financially independent as they were **10.3 pp** more likely to have any savings and 8.8 pp to manage some cash on their own, compared to the non-affected control group. These aggregate improvements pushed up their bridal prices **significantly** which consequently increased their likelihood of owning land (6 pp) and a house (**14 pp**).

Beneficial effects on girls' marriage prospects significantly decreased the out-of-wedlock pregnancy rates in non-affected areas by **1.1 pp**. When in South Sudan, the probability of being pregnant increased, the similar ELA intervention in Uganda significantly cut the fertility rates by 24% (Bandiera *et al.*, 2020, [AEJ](#)), which speaks to club's potential in curbing teen pregnancies. The diverging effects in two countries happened because the age of girls in South Sudan were on average four years older and one-third was already married at the baseline compared to only 10% of respondents in Uganda.

The findings further show how ELA clubs might have mitigated negative effects on girls' school enrollment and social networks. The ELA cushioned the significant negative effects in treatment areas while the conflict led to a 6.8 pp reduction in enrollment rates in control communities. Social-safety nets developed within clubs also preserved as girls in non-affected areas were **12.4 pp** more likely to have a place to meet with friends and 7.8 pp more likely to get help outside the family, relative to the control group.

Food-security indicators were positive across the treatment households against a higher food insecurity situation among the control participants. Families in the non-affected treatment areas even saw a significant **11 pp** rise in the probability that no one had to go hungry because of the food shortage.

➤ Way Forward

This study gives a compelling evidence of how ELA clubs can improve the socio-economic situation of young women through non-formal education and social-support networks. Despite not being tailored for the conflict context, the programme cushioned majority of negative effects on savings, social network and even schooling. The findings are broadly in consistent with the [evaluation in Sierra Leone](#) (Bandiera *et al.*, 2019) in the context of Ebola outbreak in 2014. Similarly, the [evaluation in Uganda](#) (Bandiera *et al.*, 2020) found the model transferable across countries, scalable and cost-effective with minor adjustments. Future interventions should put a stronger emphasis on gender equality within the life-skills education to increase the gender-role results of young women.